

The Message of Mindfulness

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In the Buddha's instructions for breath meditation, after you've got your body in position, he says to establish mindfulness to the fore. In other words, you make up your mind what you're going to try to remember as you meditate, and bring that to the forefront. Make it stand out in your mind. In Thai, they say to set your mind up. Of course, what often happens after you've set your mind up like this is that it falls over. You're determined to stay with the breath, but something else comes in. Either an outside noise distracts you, or other thoughts in the mind come up. And you go wandering after wherever they may lead you.

This is why we have to be alert to notice when this is happening. Then mindfulness kicks in again to bring you back to the breath. The act of reminding here is very important, because the mind so easily forgets. In the beginning, when you remind yourself, you have to use full sentences. Use short commands: "Stay here. Stay with the breath. Don't wander away." Whatever it takes to keep you remembering to stay with the breath. Then you try to remember whatever other things you need to do with the breath in order to make it easier to stay. You may remind yourself to breathe comfortably, or to focus on a certain part of the body.

This need to remember is one of the reasons why we have to study the texts at least to some extent. A couple of months back I was asked to give a talk on the topic of whether it really is necessary to know anything about what the Buddha said if you're going to meditate. Now, if you think of mindfulness simply as being aware, there's not that much that you would need to study. Your awareness is right here, it's happening all the time, so what else do you need to know? But when you realize that mindfulness means keeping something in mind, you realize further that you need to study some to know what things are the right things to keep in mind while you practice.

Sometimes this involves keeping in mind your motivation: why you're here. Sometimes it involves keeping the four noble truths in mind: remembering that we're here to look for stress, its cause, its cessation, or the path to its cessation. And then you have to remember the duties that go along with those four truths. If stress or pain comes up, you have to remember, "Don't run away," because it's so easy to want to avoid the pain, or to try to push it away. But our duty with regard to the stress and the pain is to comprehend it. That means we have to watch it. We have to watch it steadily.

In fact, your gaze has to be steadier than the pain, so that you can begin to see how the pain comes and goes—as well as what comes and goes along with it. If you see that there's an uptick in the level of your stress, you can ask yourself, "What did I think just now? What did I do just now?" Or if the level of stress goes down, what did you do? Only in that way can you see the relationship between cause and effect. It's not enough to say, "Oh, stress is inconstant, sometimes it comes, sometimes it goes," and just leave it at that. The coming and going has a cause, and you want to look deeper into where the cause is while it's happening. You've got to remember this. Once you see the cause, then you remember your duty with regard to the cause: Let it go. In other words, stop doing whatever it was that caused the stress to come.

To do this requires not only steadiness of mind but also a sense of well-being. That's why we practice concentration. The Buddha compares concentration to food. You're a soldier in a fortress at the edge of a frontier. You need food in order to fight off the enemy—in other words, your defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion. Your mindfulness needs food, too. Your mindfulness is the gatekeeper of the fortress, watching whoever might want to try to come into the fortress, remembering who's a friend and who's a foe.

Mindfulness, you know, doesn't just sit there and watch both the friends and the foes coming in. If someone's a friend, mindfulness remembers to allow him in. If someone's a foe, mindfulness remembers to keep him out. In other words, if you see unskillful mental states arising, you don't want to allow them in to destroy your concentration. Both the

soldiers, which are right effort, and the gatekeeper, right mindfulness, require food. Right concentration provides the food and nourishment that gives your mindfulness and efforts the strength they need to watch pain, or to watch stress—physical or mental—and not feel threatened by it, not feel overwhelmed by it. The food gives you strength.

This is why you have to keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath, stay with the breath. And not just stay with the breath: There are further steps in breath meditation. When you know the breath well, you try to be aware of the whole body, staying where the whole body is as you breathe in, staying where the whole body is as you breathe out.

When you're aware of the whole body, you begin to see how the breath has an impact on different properties of the body: how it affects the energy flow in the body; how it affects the sense of warmth or coolness in the body; how it affects the blood pressure—not only the rate of the blood pressure, but where the blood is being pushed.

If, when you breathe in, you have a feeling that the energy has to come up, up, up, it's going to push the blood up into your head. Which may be good sometimes, especially right after a meal when all the blood is settling down into your stomach, and you need some blood to come up to your head in order to stay awake. But there are other times when too much blood in your head leads to a headache.

So you have to remember to notice how the flow of the breath energy has an impact on these different processes in the body. Then you try to adjust them. First you give rise to a sense of fullness and well-being, and then a sense of calm. These are some of the things you have to remember. The main duty of mindfulness is to remember these things. When you read how they're described in the texts, they're in full sentences. These are verbal fabrications: "I will breathe in sensitive to the whole body. I will breathe out sensitive to the whole body." You try to remind yourself that way. "I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication. I'll breathe out calming bodily fabrication." And all the way through breathing in sensitive to mental fabrication—perceptions and feelings—breathing out sensitive to mental fabrication. The steps don't mention verbal fabrication, but each step is in itself a form of verbal fabrication: the way you remind yourself of what you want to do as you breathe in, what you want to do as you breathe out.

Then, as the mind begins to settle in, those fabrications grow more subtle. When you're able to stay well with the breath, the breath feels good. There's a sense that the mind begins to dissolve into the breath. The mind and the breath become one. Your awareness fills the body. The breath fills the body. At that point, you can drop the verbal fabrication. But this doesn't mean you drop mindfulness. At that stage, mindfulness becomes a perception. It simply uses perceptions as its means to remind you of what to do. You may have a mental image of the breath. Or a mental image of the spot where you want to stay focused. Or just the word, "breath." At that point it's not a full sentence, it's just a word. It doesn't count as verbal fabrication any more. It's now just a mental fabrication. It's a perception. And that becomes your marker, your reminder of where you are, where you want to be, what you want to do.

At this point your hindrances are far away; disturbances are far away. They may be nibbling at the edge of your awareness, but they don't really pose any threat. This is why mindfulness can get simpler. Its messages to you get simpler: just "breath, breath, breath."

Or you may have a visual image of how the breath is flowing in the body. Just hold that image in mind. That, too, is a perception. That becomes the means by which mindfulness stays maintained. From there it progresses. As you go deeper and deeper in concentration, the perception gets more subtle. It gets more refined. But all the way through, it's the means by which you remind yourself of where you are, what you're doing, and what you might be doing better.

So there are times in the meditation when mindfulness is a verbal fabrication. There are other times, as the concentration gets stronger, when mindfulness becomes just a mental fabrication. The messages you have to give yourself get simpler.

It's the same as when you're trying to steer a sailboat. If there are a lot of gusty winds, a lot of waves, the hand with which you hold the rudder has to clamp the rudder really tightly,

and you have to use a lot of strength to make sure that the boat doesn't tip over or go off course. But when the wind is light and steady, and the water is smooth, all you have to do is just barely touch the rudder and you stay on course.

It's the same when you're settling down. In the beginning, it takes a lot of work, a lot of determination, and a lot of reminders: "Stay here, stay here, don't wander off." As the mind begins to settle down, though, then the nature of the mindfulness grows more subtle. You do have to be careful not to drift off when the breath gets subtle, but the nature of your warning to yourself, the nature of your reminder, gets more subtle.

Just remind yourself: "Whole body breathing in, whole body breathing out." That's it. Or just, "whole body, whole body," especially when the breath grows still. And so on with the more subtle levels of concentration. When you go into the formless levels, it's more an image of space, the space around the body, the space permeating throughout the body, in between every atom. Just hold that image, that perception, in mind. Or the image of "knowing, knowing, knowing." Those are your reminders.

So the reminders in the beginning require a lot of effort. And sometimes your reminder to yourself can't be gentle. You've got to yell at yourself: "Why are you wandering off? Come on back!" But as the mind gets more tame and gains a greater sense of ease, well-being, and refreshment in the meditation, then it's a lot easier to stay here. That's one of the reasons why we work with the breath, to make the work of mindfulness easier. Its messages can become simpler, more gentle, but still effective.

This is how the concentration develops as a skill as you move from the step of getting the mind to be with the breath or establishing it on the breath, to maintaining it. Setting it up is one thing. Keeping it set is something more refined.